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ABSTRACT

While in some respects it has never been easier to teach film and video production, in other respects it has never been more difficult and beset with inconsistencies. For instance, pervasive advertising products of the video networks (i.e., epic scale commercials and music videos) frequently engage in the anarchy of postmodern excess, making it hard to formulate an objective critique of work that superficially appears to be violating hallowed rules out of radical spite. How can a critique be developed for the use of such imaging variables as black and white versus color, gain boosted CCD grain versus a low noise signal, Steadicam versus "shakycam?" The latter term, derived from one of many television production technique parodies featured on "Late Night with David Letterman," has been referred to as "the film school look," "watering the lawn," and "monkeycam." The difficulty in distinguishing good from bad shakycam inhibits its usefulness for teaching purposes. Whereas the experienced camera user develops a sense of composition in accordance with established guidelines (the rule of thirds, leading the subject, and the balancing of mass) guidelines for shakycam have yet to be developed. The destabilizing effect of the technique disrupts the ordinarily purposeful movement of the viewer's eye to produce specific emotional responses. A consideration of the fundamental characteristics of perceptual and cognitive processes can perhaps support rules that allow evaluation of good and bad shakycam. It is even possible to opine why, at this time, there is monkeycam--but not how much longer it has to be endured. (SAM)

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Monkeycam See-Monkeycam Do: Considering reflexive æsthetics in the teaching of film and video production.

Gregory Gutenko

In some respects, it has never been easier to teach film and video production. Video recording has never been so economically and technologically accessible for the average consumer. The colossus of the film industry is a closely studied public entertainment in itself, and its pantheon of cinema stars now includes behind-the-camera (but "above-the-line") directors, writers, and producers. These media are far less arcane and obscure than they were only a decade ago, and many of the people who enroll in production oriented courses come with a practiced eye and handle the camera with a familiar and comfortable grip.

In other respects, however, the teaching of film and video production has never been more difficult and beset with inconsistencies. This past decade has also witnessed a glut of postmodernist expression. While commercial narrative works, out of what might be referred to as metadiscursive necessity, remain true to the formal practices which are descended from the classical rules of composition and montage, the pervasive advertising products of the video networks (including those epic scale commercials, music videos) frequently indulge in the contradictions and anarchy of postmodernist excess. There is a plenitude of pedagogical resources in circulation which deal effectively and efficiently with the conventional standards and practises of film and video production. Accounting for recent popular stylistic variances in

imaging and editing is not so easily done, especially when concrete and pragmatic guidance needs to be applied to immediate production situations. It is difficult to extoll and advocate conformity to conventional production styles and practices when it becomes necessary to contend with the alternatives, and it can be maddening to formulate an objective critique of work that superficially appears to only be violating hallowed rules out of radical spite.

One could maintain that there are no new "rules", that all meaning is subjective, media hegemony is simply being confounded, and any evaluation of nonconformist production techniques can legitimately be made only on the basis of the "gut-reaction" or on an æsthetic response that is individually and culturally immediate and transient. Certainly, professional practitioners often do not or can not objectify their responses to the unconventional at a level any more articulate than this, and this would seem to be at least good company. In the professions, however, the pressure to turn out product precludes much in the way of reflection on the why of what is done. There is little innovation and much imitation when a professional's work schedule requires that thirty seconds of advertising message must be rendered in two hours, handed off to the next communications professional, then forgotten to make way for the next thirty second product. The idealized scenarios wherein seasoned and attuned *creatives* brainstorm truly new and revolutionary approaches to communicative acts is far rarer than most outsiders are led to believe.

A voracious demand for content, in terms of both material and concepts, has been created by ever expanding entertainment services. As video artist Don DeHass has remarked, with some degree of seriousness, "every television program that has ever been made is on television now." (DeHass) Increased channel capacities are now outstripping the availability of both old and new products, which are absorbed like photons into the abyss of a

dark star. The pressure to produce products assures imitation and replication; there is little time for experimentation and reflection in the media industries. As Lynch observed of the early development of the music video industry, "they borrow the techniques of Dada, Surrealism and abstract film." (Lynch) As Dieckmann concurs, the "commercialized industry takes up avant-garde practises to sell products." (Dieckmann) The rampant pilfering of the last half century of works by experimental film and video artists to satisfy the output demands of commercial and music video production operations has meant that imaging techniques and well as images have been appropriated and brought to the attention of wider audiences.

Certainly, the recycling of images is a well-documented feature of postmodernist media sensibilities (Fiske), and along with the cultural meanings associated with visual signs and icons come the more ambiguous significations of how these images are manipulated. Again, due to production output demands, it is typically not a consideration of most professionals as to how and why a particular visual technique provokes a particular response in a viewer/reader. What is of paramount importance is that it consistently evokes that response, and that the professional has the experiential understanding to intuitively recognize when the technique works and when it doesn't (the "gut-reaction") and knows how to structure, replicate, and adapt the technique to a variety of suitable products.

While a professional might be comfortable with an intuitive recognition of what works and what doesn't, those who are obliged to discuss, demonstrate, and evaluate media production practices are burdened with the need and responsibility to define and even quantify such practices. How does one formulate a response with some degree of objective analysis which can provide some fair measure of evaluative reliability? What does heightened

reflexivity invoke? How does one critique the use of such imaging variables as black and white versus color, gain boosted CCD grain versus a low noise signal, Steadicam versus "shakycam"? What does shakycam signify? The ambiguities of such factors are perhaps no better appreciated than in this last production variable.

The term itself is only by informal professional consensus the most apt, although this camera handling technique has also been referred to as "the film school look", "watering the lawn", and "monkeycam". The latter term is derived from one of many television production technique parodies featured on the *Late Night with David Letterman* program. (While the Late Night Monkeycam interludes were rarely attempted, the more predictable Late Night Thrillcam was a frequent feature, providing audiences with a sliding overhead point of view of the house and stage accompanied by a soundtrack of screaming rollercoaster riders.) The shakycam look is that of an unstable, wandering shot. Contrasted with the conventional appearance of either a smoothly moving mounted camera or a gracefully floating Steadicam stabilized camera, the shakycam camera appears erratic and unplanned, the antithesis of the well crafted and well directed product.

Shakycam might suggest a variety of implied situational states; spontaneity, naïveté, confusion, improvisation, instability, perhaps even chaos. In contrast with the implied situational states of professional control and manipulation of the production variables, shakycam might suggest a greater innocence of process. The difficulty in distinguishing good and appropriate shakycam from bad or inappropriate shakycam requires, then, discerning some form of positive and constructive communication æsthetic within something which appears to be random or thoughtlessly anarchic. Without some grasp of what makes for good and what makes for bad shakycam, it

becomes an arbitrary and counterproductive exercise to advise on and evaluate shakycam in a teaching situation, and it would be irresponsibly dismissive to simply forbid the use of shakycam as long as it remains a prominent technique in what can be considered highly sophisticated television applications. This is a question of some importance, because it is not acceptable to simply imitate, or counsel the imitation of a technique applied without regard to the purpose and intent of an act or product of communication.

In attempting to discuss shakycam in æsthetic terms, it may help to consider the concept of æsthetics at its most essential. As Small and others often state as they prepare the way in discussions of atypical film and video forms, the nature of æsthetics can be contrasted with the more familiar nature of anesthetics. (Small) Anesthetics obstruct the senses, dull perceptions. Fundamental to æsthetics then, and prior to the consideration of any cultural or intellectual attributes, is sensation and the cognitive processing of sensation. Any attempt at a classification of æsthetic action, while it must acknowledge the meaningfulness of operant cultural ideologies, must also take into consideration the effects and outcomes of perception, both within the human organism and within the technology. The richest source of guidance in this area is found in the extensive history and ontology of experimental film and video. The conceptual intricacies of the art, however, can be daunting for those who are seeking out fundamental answers to the works/doesn't work of what the art has defined as reflexive techniques. Recent theoretical perspectives in media criticism offer powerful ways in which production codes can be systematized by their cultural significance, but the pragmatics of focus, camera movement, image degradation, and other keyboard-enterable and software-directed production variables contended with in the field requires a reliable linkage between unequivocal and experimentally verified

theories and the enacting of immediate æsthetic action. A stable perceptual-cognitive component needs to be applied in any pragmatic consideration of production æsthetics.

To begin the consideration of shakycam æsthetics, it it necessary to define what is "authentic" or natural shakycam and what is contrived shakycam. As suggested by an alternative naming, the "film school" look might be the result of a neophyte camera user's lack of bodily motor control and an inability to obtain a desired image composition. The image shakes and drifts because the camera is either not securely held, or the camera user is unable to isolate body movement from the camera. The "film school" look is certainly not the best of terms to use, since much the same disturbance occurs at the hands of a professional in a tumultuous situation, as in the case of news film or video shot during a violent or unpredictable event. In this case, the more respectable term *cinéma vérité* might be applied. In either situation, the image is frequently destabilized due to body movements being transmitted directly through the camera.

This factor will induce only certain movements, and not others. As the body has specific points of pivot and leverage, the "authenticity" of camera shake will correspond to those moves that the body in motion will produce. Bad shakycam would, therefore, exhibit movement that is arbitrary and truly random, perhaps the loose movements of camera on an unlocked camera mount with only one rotational point. The accuracy of axial movements becomes one aspect for evaluation.

A second destabilizing factor relates to the search for the satisfactorily captured subject, the well-framed shot. Again, due to indecisiveness or interference, the desired framing of a subject may be acquired, lost, sought out and acquired again, lost again, and so forth. As the center of attention

changes, so too may the framing of the shot be changed, and not always with perfect anticipation on the part of the camera operator. Still, there should be a pattern of acquisition and loss, reflecting the deliberateness of the capturing/compositional process and the intelligence which motivates it.

An experienced camera user will inevitably develop a sense of composition, usually one in accordance with such established guidelines as the rule of thirds, leading the subject, and the balancing of mass. These rules guide the establishment of a frame in which the subject or subjects are arranged in a conventionally pleasing manner, and the viewer is customarily presented with a field of view within which the viewer may look about with some degree of free choice. Many compositional rules are intended to lead the viewer's gaze about within the established frame purposefully. How much freedom will be allowed would depend on the director's intentions, and where the director stands in the continuum between the predominant Eisensteinian fictive/ transformational maxims and Bazin's philosophy of *Total Cinema*. But for the naïve user, the camera often becomes a device like a rifle scope, where the subject is captured dead-center like a hapless hare. (This is usually when the rule of thirds is invoked to prod the naïve user to place their subjects off of center in the frame.) Should the naïve user's interest be distributed over a number of subjects in the scene being captured, often the camera will be moved from one point of focus or attention to another, following much the same pattern that they might trace with their eyes if they were observing the scene directly, or might scan with their eyes if they were observing a stable, well-composed shot that included all of the subjects of interest (the wide *mise-en-scène* of Bazin's *Total Cinema*). But can there be authenticity and artifice even in this apparently random flitting from one momentary visual fancy to another? Indeed, movement that does not appear to be tracking natural and

shifting points of attention such as significant visual elements (eyes, lips, hands), intrusive sound sources, and motion, is fully purposeless. Eyes move with purpose.

How eyes are moved during the activity of seeing is a highly studied phenomenon. Eye movement recording systems have been used to analyze the pathways and stopping points subjects produce while attending to printed pages and television commercials. In advertising research, this has provided evidence of where a viewer's attention is drawn, and in what manner attention shifts, but does not alone provide insight into cognitive responses. (Dorfman). While multiple measuring configurations have supported the hypothesis that "specific eye movements are indicative of specific sensory components in thought" (Buckner, Meara, Reese), this line of investigation has been somewhat too indirect for most professional media applications, and eye movement research has most recently been directed towards the mapping of perceptual/cognitive neural pathways and loci in the brain. Current applications of eye movement study include both information display design and the control of devices by eye movements, and these areas are well supported by both private industry and government funding. Since funding and progress in research inevitably parallel each other (Jones), the elaboration of knowledge concerning visual perception and the subsequent verification of much practice that has been taken on faith appears promising.

What the simpler eye movement recordings, as used in advertising research, demonstrate is that the eye moves almost constantly. It is moved both deliberately, as when a page is read, and without deliberation. It must move, at least at the level of saccades, in order to maintain retinal activity. The narrow angle of full visual acuity also makes constant eye movement necessary. (If a reader fixes their eye on the first word of a paragraph, they

will be able to see but not discern adequately a word four or five lines away from the first word...not until they look away to it.) What "authentic" shakycam appears to exhibit is a camera movement that corresponds closely with eye movement. This "authenticity" of movement is a subjective conclusion at this point, but it should be possible to test this conclusion and establish greater reliability for it if it would be of value to do so. The accuracy of the camera-as-eye movements becomes a second aspect for evaluation.

Camera-as-eye movement is more intensive in effect that what is seen directly with the eye because the eye which regards reality moves within a field of vision covering approximately 180 degrees. The camera, on the other hand, drags with it a framed field of view that may cover only about 10 to 25 degrees, a very narrow aperture. This image movement in addition is situated within and is unsynchronized with the viewer's natural 180 degree vision.

In critiquing a shakycam product's appearance of authenticity of naïveté and spontaneity in movement, it may not be necessary to be concerned with the understanding and identification of actual associated sensory/cognitive components. In the most fundamental sense of æsthetics presented earlier, camera-as-eye movement may act constructively as a perceptual component singularly through prior association with image memory or culturally transmitted and valued image and experience. In other words, signification as assigned by cultural consensus may be as meaningful in communication as any inescapable and seemingly autonomic sensory components "hard-wired" into the structure of the brain. Certainly, however, it is worth recognizing the communicative value of understanding and coordinating both of these cognitive influences.

From this evaluative approach to the authenticity of shakycam movement, there is not much to be concluded concerning shakycam meaning. One of the first television commercials to apply shakycam presented a scene of a high level corporate meeting in which a desperately sweating executive was being chastised mercilessly for contracting out the company's telephone system to the "wrong long distance phone company". The disruptive camerawork was effectively in harmony with the fear and chaos of the executive's corporate crucifixion. Other television commercials have used shakycam to suggest the intimacies of home video, and the radical chic of shaky has contributed much to fashion products that are, after all, only pants and hats and shoes. And where would music video be without it? But in the rush to be on "the edge", breakfast cereals and laxatives have also imitated the technique, and without the slightest thematic or emotional congruence between the technique's cognitive/cultural significations and the intended message. Reflexivity can be pleasing to observe, and directing attention towards the camera-recording process by placing it in the foreground may manufacture a beneficial appearance of candor on the part of the message-maker, but the meanings of such methods are not consistent and unambiguous.

From a production æsthetics standpoint then, it <u>is</u> possible to distinguish between good and bad monkeycam and other reflexive techniques, and a consideration of the fundamental characteristics of perceptual and cognitive processes can provide substantial support for understanding how these attributes function. It is even possible to opine why, at this time, there is monkeycam. It may not, however, be possible to answer how much longer we will have to endure monkeycam.

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